



Galatians 5:16-21
Flesh and Spirit
2/5/2023

We are picking up in Galatians 5:16 today. Paul wrote in Galatians 5:1:

Galatians 5:1 “For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.”

And the whole book of Galatians is unpacking what the free life in Jesus looks like - a life free from religious pressure to perform to earn God’s acceptance, and a life free of the old slavery to sin.

Last week we saw that Christ frees us from having to earn our place with God so we no longer have to bite and devour and be consumed with one another, but we can rather serve one another in love.

And today and next Sunday we will read a passage that speaks of the freedom we can have in an inner battle that we have as Christians: the battle of the flesh versus the Spirit. We’ll unpack what that means, and this week’s passage will be all about what the flesh produces when we follow it, while next week’s will be all about what the Spirit produces when we follow Him.

So today’s verses will be very much about sin, while next week’s will be all about the goodness and virtues created by the Spirit. Which means that today there will be a heavy emphasis on sin and what it looks like when we are following after the flesh, and the balance will come next week - next week will be much more positive. Next week will balance this week.

Now I’d never actually have to make this disclaimer if today’s message were going to be unbalanced on the side of talking about positive virtues that the Spirit produces in our lives. But I make the disclaimer because any talk of sin in our day has become taboo. To talk about sin and judgment is off-putting. Some think that to speak of sin or repentance we’d have to be raging fundamentalists, full of nothing but condemnation for our neighbors.

Atheist Sam Harris, in his book, Letter to a Christian Nation, writes to Christians:

“Your principle concern appears to be that the Creator of the universe will take offense at something people do while naked. This prudery of yours contributes daily to the surplus of human misery.”¹

So we hear that criticism, and we might be tempted stop and only speak of what’s positive and encouraging all the time. But to do so, we’d have to ignore a good portion of the Bible and the main reason Jesus had to come and die.

Jesus is at the center of our story, and his story is wrapped up in his loving mission to free us from sin and death. So you can’t faithfully tell the story of Jesus without talking about sin. You lose the narrative.

So before we jump into the passage I want to make the case that, while sin is bad, understanding sin and teaching about sin and focusing on sin in the right measure is actually good and vital for understanding Jesus, for our relationship with Him, for our lives and relationships, and for understanding the world.

Author Christopher Watkin has a recent book called Biblical Critical Theory, which is not an endorsement of the critical theories of our day, it’s quite the opposite, it holds out scripture as the lens through which we are to view all of life instead of other critical theories. But he has a lot of insights throughout that book, and his insights on sin are really helpful and I’m drawing from them a bit here.

Romans 3:23 “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,”

And knowing that fallenness into sin is the natural state of every human heart, including our own hearts, is vital to navigating the world the right way. Knowing this truth, that all have sinned, is up there with knowing the laws of gravity when it comes to understanding how the world works.

One aspect of the value of this doctrine that Watkin points out is that it

1. Believing we are Sinful Opens the Door to Self-Critique and Mitigates Self-Justification²

¹ As quoted in Biblical Critical Theory by Christopher Watkin. (Grand Rapids, Zondervan), 2022, p. 109.

² Biblical Critical Theory by Christopher Watkin. (Grand Rapids, Zondervan), 2022, p. 116-118, 123.

Believing I am a sinner enables me to learn and grow. If I know I have been corrupted by sin, then I will have a distrust my motives. I can be selfish.

If I anticipate discovering some sin or deficiency in myself, if I expect hypocrisy and selfishness in my heart, then when someone points that out to me I can consider that their criticism is true and address it. Or even if nobody points it out to me but I just keep producing bad fruit - my critical nature keeps driving people away, my ego keeps alienating my friends, my victim mentality keeps wearing everybody out around me, I can look at myself, expecting to find sin, and then when I see it I can confess it to God, to those I've hurt, I can repent, I can seek forgiveness, I can try to make it right with people, I can learn and grow.

But if I don't really believe that all have sinned, if I don't believe that applies to me, when confronted by my friends or by my fruit, I might be tempted to throw up my fists to defend my ego. I might even double down on behavior that seems to be alienating others and ruining things, as if I'm always right.

So believing I am a sinner, while not always a pleasant thought, opens the door to self-critique and mitigates self-justification.

2. Believing We Are Sinful also promotes the belief in the equality of all people³

The fact that we are all sinners in need of Jesus means that, while some people may be more competent and accomplished than others, while some rightly outrank others at work or on the athletic field, nobody is truly above another when it comes to being able to earn our way to God - none of us can. At the end of the day, all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

This allows us to not feel above anyone. It allows us to have a healthy distrust in those who pretend to be above us, and a real pity for those who are in a bad place in life because we don't assume they always deserve that more than me.

Believing this helps us realize we're all in the same ship, and creates a brotherhood and sisterhood.

³ Biblical Critical Theory by Christopher Watkin. (Grand Rapids, Zondervan), 2022, p. 116-118.

Chesterton writes that this doctrine that all have sinned is an “*obviously unattractive idea...but when we wait for its results, they are pathos and brotherhood, and a thunder of laughter and pity; for only with original sin can we at once pity the beggar and distrust the king.*”⁴

It’s actually good for democracy to believe in this because, as CS Lewis wrote, “Mankind is so fallen that no man can be trusted with unchecked power over his fellows.”⁵

3. Believing we are All Sinful Promotes Better Relationships

We have a tendency to assume that once we see a sin in somebody, that that person is all bad. If they sin in one way that we discover, they must sin in all ways all the time. They’re now bad, and we’re good. It’s us and them.

But if we rightly believe we are all sinful, even me, then we can’t assess people that way, because we all know that would have to be true of me as well. If it’s true that if you sin in one way you sin always in all ways, then that must also be true of me.

5. Believing We Are All Sinful Shows us where to draw the line between what’s good in the world and what’s evil in the world

People always look for evil in the world. Sometimes they’ll draw the line between good and evil between what is immaterial and material. The material world is evil and the spiritual world is good.

Or they’ll try to draw the lines between classes, where the rich are evil and the poor are good.

Or they’ll draw the line between the races, saying my race is good and another is evil.

Or, we do this in politics, we draw the line between the good and the evil based on party affiliation and say like the Pharisee in the temple, “I am not like this other man.”

But Christianity says the fault line doesn’t run between us and them, but right down the middle of each of our hearts.

⁴ Biblical Critical Theory by Christopher Watkin. (Grand Rapids, Zondervan), 2022, p. 116.

⁵ Biblical Critical Theory by Christopher Watkin. (Grand Rapids, Zondervan), 2022, p. 119.

In the early 1900s, the Times of London asked some prominent authors to answer the question: “What’s wrong with the world today?”

G.K. Chesterton’s essay in response was one sentence long:

“Dear Sir, I am...”⁷

Bonhoeffer, from a Nazi prison, wrote, “Nothing that we despise in the other is entirely absent from ourselves.”⁸

Christians believe that that line between good and evil runs right down the center of every human heart, including our own. We have that evil in us. So we can’t ever be entirely other from other sinners out there.

There is real virtue in us. We don’t sin all we possibly could or in every way we possibly could. But nobody in all of history figured out how to love God with all of their heart, soul, mind, and strength, except for Jesus.⁹

5. Believing in sin is inevitable. It’s not whether we believe in sins, but which behavior we deem to be sins.

In fact, listen to this quote from atheist Richard Dawkins when he speaks of the unhealthy preoccupation Christian theologians have with sin:

“They could have devoted their pages and their sermons to extolling the sky splashed with stars, or mountains and green forests, seas and dawn choruses. These are occasionally mentioned, but the Christian focus is overwhelmingly on sin sin sin sin sin sin sin. What a nasty little preoccupation to have dominating your life”¹⁰

In criticizing Christians for their emphasis on sin, what is he saying? He’s saying that we’re sinning. It’s a sin to emphasize sin so much. So it’s not whether we believe in sins and speak about them, it’s which behaviors we believe to be sins.

⁶ Biblical Critical Theory by Christopher Watkin. (Grand Rapids, Zondervan), 2022, p. 125-127.

⁷ Biblical Critical Theory by Christopher Watkin. (Grand Rapids, Zondervan), 2022, p. 128.

⁸ Biblical Critical Theory by Christopher Watkin. (Grand Rapids, Zondervan), 2022, p. 128.

⁹ Biblical Critical Theory by Christopher Watkin. (Grand Rapids, Zondervan), 2022, p. 129.

¹⁰ Dawkins, Richard. The God Delusion p. 252

And its a matter of who determines what is a sin. And how to be redeemed from sin.

So sin is bad, but three cheers for teaching about sin and judgment and all the good that seeing the world for what it really is can do in our lives, our church, and in our world.

So, while it certainly isn't our only emphasis, we are talking today about sin sin sin sin sin sin sin. Our text today is:

Galatians 5:16–21 [16] But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. [17] For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. [18] But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. [19] Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, [20] idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, [21] envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

So in verses 16-19, Paul lays out the source of a Christian's sin, what he calls in verse 16 the "desires of the flesh." The King James version calls it "the lust of the flesh."

And the way we hear those words in our day we could assume that the flesh is the body and the lusts of the flesh are just sexual desires. But that isn't how Paul used either one of these words.

The flesh, in Paul's writings, is not our physical body, but the part of us that did not get fixed when we became Christians. Which includes our physical bodies, but also attitudes, habits, mindsets, and emotions that didn't get changed in the moment that we became Christians.

When we believe we are changed, we are given new hearts. The Spirit of God comes to dwell within us. But there's still the flesh, or what Paul calls the "old man" that is vexing us until we see Jesus and are made totally new.

Matthew 26:41 "Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.

Ephesians 4:22-24 “22 to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, 23 and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, 24 and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

So there is, in every Christian, a conflict between the old self and the new self, between the part of us that hasn't changed yet (the flesh), and the Holy Spirit of God living within us.

And we will either choose to follow the flesh, the old self, or choose to follow God's Spirit within us. And the way we know which one we are following is by what we are producing: do we bear the fruit that comes from following the Spirit, which we will talk about next week, or are we producing the works that you produce when you follow the flesh.

Jesus said you will know a tree by its fruit. And we can know if we are consistently following the flesh or the Spirit of God by the type of fruit growing on our lives. So Paul says:

Galatians 5:[19] Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, [20] idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, [21] envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

In writings around this time, it was common for people to write lists of virtues and vices. And Paul, following the style of his day, lays out for us the vices of following the flesh and the virtues of following the Spirit.

You could categorize and group these several ways. There might be 3 main categories: sexual sins, religious sins, social sins. But each of these terms is meant to stand on its own as a call for Christians not to indulge in it.

So let's work through the works of the flesh. First he lists out the sexual sins:

[19] Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality,

The consistent teaching of scripture is that sex is created by God to be practiced and enjoyed only between a husband and a wife. And there are many ways we could violate that. Paul mentions:

Sexual immorality - moicheia , which is any violation of a marriage covenant. A married person cheating, or cheating with a married person.

Impurity - porneia - where we get our word pornography. This is any sex outside the marriage between a husband and wife. It includes sex between singles, it includes lust and pornography.

Sensuality - akatharsia - uncleanness. God has made sex clean when it is used according to its purpose between a husband and a wife. Any anything outside of that, in thought or deed, is unclean.

But why are Christians so hung up on these things? Why do these matter? Is the creator of the universe, to quote Harris, really so concerned with what naked people do together?

Yes - and for our good.

Because sex is created by God as an act of being naked and unashamed with somebody. It is saying with your body, "I'm keeping nothing back from you."

But if we give ourselves to someone physically without giving them our full commitment, our future, our hopes, our dreams, all that we have, our legal status, our allegiance - we are lying to them.

Sex is God's ordained way to continually renew that covenant that you make with your husband or wife, and to have it outside of that covenant makes it a lie, and makes it dirty. It makes it an act of getting something out of someone as opposed to giving everything to someone.

That's why it is reserved only for marriage.

Not because it's a dirty thing, but because it is a sacred, powerful thing.

It's supposed to be part of making yourself increasingly vulnerable and trusting.

If you take it outside of that commitment, it works in reverse. It causes you to not trust like you should. To believe this person only wants what they can get from me, they won't give themselves to me fully. It makes you, not closer, but lonelier when practiced outside of the covenant bonds.

So God, in his grace, calls all sex outside of the marriage bond sin.

Then he lists the religious sins:

[20] idolatry, sorcery,

Idolatry is the worship of anything that is not God - probably religious cult worship in this context.

Sorcery - is the greek word pharmakeia, where we get our word for pharmacy. But it isn't the use of medicine in view, but is the practice of witchcraft and hallucinogenic drugs, the kinds of things that deceive the mind. (Revelation 18:23). Those aren't things Christians should get in to.

Then he lists the social sins.

20 enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, [21] envy,

Enmity - is sometimes translated hatred. It just means making enemies unnecessarily.

Strife can be translated "fightings." Christians are not to be quarrelsome people who love to fight and make enemies. (Even on twitter.)

Jealousies are just what they sound like. They're a boiling to have what someone else has and an anger that they have it.

"Angers"- thumoi - passionate rage.

Rivalries - are acting in your own self-interest, even if it causes problems for others.

Dissensions - dividing people into pointless groups and factions that don't need to be factions. Which is similar to:

Divisions - “heresies.”

Envyings - gaining pleasure from the harm of another and displeasure from the good of another.

drunkenness, orgies, and things like these.

Scriptures don’t forbid the use of alcohol, but do prohibit getting drunk. And the orgies he is talking about were probably the common sex-laden religious festivals that were common in his day.

And he wraps this whole vice list us with “and things like these.”

So the list isn’t exhaustive, so if there’s a “what about this” that’s some combination of these things or similar but not exactly the same, Paul says, “Yeah, that counts too.”

Now, with all he has said about how we become Christians: that it is by grace through faith and not by works, you might expect him to conclude all of this by saying something like:

“But ultimately, even if you do these things, it doesn’t matter because you have the grace of Jesus.”

Or

“But don’t be consumed by the rules, Christianity is about a relationship.”

But instead he says something far more grave and sober:

Galatians 5:21 **“I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.”**

Woah.

Our works don’t get us to God. But here Paul says that if we do these things, we don’t go to heaven.

So what's up with that?

Well it isn't that our works get us to God. But a life that is at peace with consistently practicing any of these things is bearing such bad fruit, that it is indicating that we don't have the Spirit of God and are not Christians on our way to heaven.

When we do these things actively, when we celebrate these things, when we accommodate these things - we are showing where we're going, and it isn't to the kingdom of God.

Now this doesn't mean a Christian will never sin in any of these categories.

Literally "those practicing such things" - it's a continuous active verb.

When these things are how we roll, when we are at peace with them, when they are a lifestyle, we aren't demonstrating that inner-conflict that should be present in believers.

There should be a war - flesh vs. spirit. Everything on this list can be done by a real Christian, but you have the Spirit inside you who grieves, and mourns, and causes you to fear the Lord, and convicts.

The fact that we are conflicted over our own behavior is not the evidence that we're not Christians. The absence of conflict in the presence of these sins is the evidence that we're not.

To settle in and make peace with sin, to make peace with disobedience, impurity, unrighteousness is a sign that the Spirit of God is not in us. To not want to obey God, to not mourn over our sin, to not struggle is to not be a Christian.

To become a Christian is not to have temptation lose all of its power. Nobody could look on a Christian's heart and say "all he does is win." There's a battle. We have a whole new set of desires, we have new wants. And a war happens within.

So don't see your conflict and your sense that you aren't doing this Christian thing really well as a sign that you're not one. Rejoice that there is a conflict, that there are new desires, the Spirit of God is in you, causing you to love God's law, to desire to obey. To acknowledge failure, to confess sin.

And when we do see sin, what do we do with it?

Remember everyone believes in some sins, but its a question of who defines them and how we are redeemed.

Christians believe God can define sins. And we are redeemed by Jesus.

GOSPEL - longer invitation.

The fault line runs through our hearts, and if we don't realize this, we can't be saved. But if we do realize this, we can throw ourselves on Christ and be saved.

Prayer of Confession:

Adapted from a Prayer Entitled "Walking in Darkness" from the prayer book, Streams of Mercy by Barbara Duguid.

Father,

Our hearts are often full of darkness, blinded by self-love. You have called us to love one another as you have loved us, but we confess before you our complete unwillingness and inability to obey this command. And we are often more swayed by the flesh than by the Spirit.

But amidst the darkness of our hearts we see a great Light.

Lord Jesus, you are the Light of the World, come to make known your Father's grace and truth. When you left your throne to take on human flesh, you saw and loved people as they truly were, not for what you could get from them. Though tempted in every way as we are, you remained pure and undefiled, walking constantly in the light and loving us faithfully to the very end.

Because of the darkness of our sin, your sinless body was hung bruised and bloodied on the cross. You set aside your glory, and entered the darkness of your Father's wrath that our sins had merited, for our salvation.

Lord, help us to walk as children of light who have been rescued from the grip of darkness. Help us to become people who want to obey because we know the light of your love. Draw us to meditate on the perfection of your Son, who never lifted his heart to an idol. Strengthen us to remember that his obedience and death have brought us to share in his glorious inheritance, and may this truth dissolve our hard hearts with gratitude. May we learn to walk in humble dependence on your truth day by day, trusting that your grace is sufficient for us to come boldly into your presence as cherished children. In Jesus' name, amen.

Assurance:

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” – Romans 5:1

Sermon Discussion Questions:

- 1) Discuss why it is helpful to believe in and speak about sin.
- 2) Can this be done too much?
- 3) Why does God care about these things?
- 4) If we are not saved by works, why does Paul say, “those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God” in Galatians 5:21?
- 5) How do we balance believing in salvation by grace through faith with a vice list such as this one?